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WEIGHT GAIN THE HEALTHY WAY

It is hard to believe in this overweight society that there are those who are trying to gain weight, but if you have a BMI (body mass index) less than 19, you have probably experienced the looks of astonishment and lack of compassion from others when you try to explain how challenging it can be.

Who would want to GAIN weight?

- People who want to build muscle – football and hockey players, body builders, teenage boys, active men and women.
- Correct weight loss due to illness, infection, surgery, etc.
- Undernourished and/or underweight older adults and elderly

How do I GAIN weight?

To gain 1-2 pounds per week, you would need to eat an additional 500-1000 calories per day above and beyond what your body needs for weight maintenance. However, some people are “hard gainers” and require even more calories than this. Look at your family members! Just as genes play a role in a person’s inability to *lose* weight, a genetic predisposition to thinness may limit the extent to which diet and exercise will influence weight *gain* as well.

How do I INCREASE calories?

The bottom line is calories *in* vs. calories *out*.

- Consistently eat three meals per day; don’t skip any meals.
- Eat a snack between each meal, and at night.
- Eat larger portions at meal times.
- Eat calorie-dense foods; add heart-healthy nuts, olive oil or canola oil to salads, sandwiches, soups, pastas, grains, cereals, shakes/smoothies, etc.

Following are some tips for choosing more calorie-dense foods.

- **Cold Cereal** – choose dense cereals like granola, muesli, shredded wheat and other cereals that have at least 200 calories per cup; top cereal with chopped nuts, sunflower seeds, sliced banana, raisins and other dried fruits.
- **Hot Cereal** – cook with milk (instead of water) and mix in powdered milk, trans-free margarine and/or peanut butter; top with chopped nuts, sunflower seeds, sliced banana, raisins and other dried fruits.
- **Beverages** – real fruit juices have more calories than water and some sports drinks.
- **Fruits** – dense fruits such as bananas, pineapple and dried fruits have more calories than watery fruits such as oranges, plums, peaches, melons and berries.
- **Milk** – boost the caloric value of milk by adding powdered milk, malt powder, and powdered drink mixes; make blender drinks like milkshakes and fruit smoothies by adding yogurt, frozen yogurt, bananas, peanut butter, etc.
- **Bread** – select hearty, dense, thick-sliced breads of at least 100 calories per slice.
- **Soups** – choose hearty lentil, split pea, minestrone and bean soups; make canned soups more substantial by adding milk instead of water.
- **Meats** – select lean cuts of beef, pork and lamb and skinless poultry to limit unhealthy saturated fat; but choose fatty fish like salmon, which has healthy omega-3 fats.

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- **Beans/Legumes** – lentils, chili with beans, black beans and rice, baked beans, and other bean dishes are high in calories, protein, carbohydrate and fiber.
- **Vegetables** – starchy vegetables like peas, corn, carrots, potatoes, yams, and winter squash are more calorie-dense than lettuce, spinach and other greens, green beans, broccoli, summer squash and many other vegetables.
- **Salads** – boost the calories of tossed salad by adding cottage cheese, chick peas (garbanzo beans), sunflower seeds, raisins, chopped nuts, tuna or chicken, croutons, and a heart-healthy salad dressing made with olive oil or canola oil.
- **Desserts** – select desserts with some potential for nutritional value such as oatmeal-raisin cookies, fig bars, chewy granola bars, puddings, frozen yogurt, stewed fruit compotes, pumpkin pie, carrot cake, and other quick breads or muffins; add chopped nuts and dried fruits for extra calories and crunch.

How much extra PROTEIN do I need to gain weight?

The body doesn't automatically store extra protein as muscle...a pound of steak doesn't just get converted into a bigger bicep. Muscles increase in size when they are overloaded with weight lifting or other resistance exercises.

Carbohydrates are necessary to fuel the muscles so they can do more exercise. Extra calories in any form – protein, carbohydrate or fat – will be stored as adipose tissue if not needed for basic metabolism or activity.

Problems with EXCESS protein:

- If you fill your stomach with too much protein, you won't be fueling your muscles with carbohydrates needed for the energy requirement of exercise.
- Increased risk for dehydration.
- Increased risk for calcium excretion (loss from bone).
- High protein diet is more likely to be higher in unhealthy, saturated fat from greasy hamburgers, sausage, fried chicken, etc.

Problems with INADEQUATE protein:

- Impaired growth in children and adolescents
- Fatigue and weakness
- Decreased immune function; lingering colds or flu
- Impaired wound healing

What is ADEQUATE protein intake?

Recommended protein intake for muscle-building, weight gain or growth (teens) is about 0.6-0.9 grams protein per pound of body weight, or about 15% of total calories. This amount is equal to about 90-135 grams of protein for a 150-pound person. Approximately 110 grams of protein could be obtained by eating 6 ounces chicken breast (42 grams), 6 ounces tuna fish (42 grams) and 3 cups of milk – not including the protein in breads, cereals, grains and vegetables!

What about protein SUPPLEMENTS?

Costly protein powders and amino acid supplements are not a necessary – chances are good that you'll be eating extra protein when you eat extra calories. And that's why supplements work – they provide extra calories, which can be easily obtained from food. The benefit of supplements is that it is often easier to DRINK extra calories than eat them. But you can make your own high protein, high calorie, nutrient-dense shakes at home with instant breakfast powder, milk, banana, peanut butter and dry milk powder.



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The Bottom Line:

To gain weight, you need to offset the energy balance equation by eating more calories than what your body needs in a day. If your body uses these extra calories for resistance training, then you can build muscle mass. If your body does not need the extra calories for basic metabolism (breathing, circulation, respiration, etc.), physical activity, growth, or muscle repair, then the extra energy can be stored as fat (adipose tissue).

References:

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2. Clark, N. Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook, 3rd Edition. Human Kinetics Publishers: Champaign, IL; 2003.

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